

(Willard de Lue wrote a series of articles entitled *Afoot on the South Shore in the Boston Globe*. Some of them were about Duxbury. — Ed.)

Old Duxbury Village Once Called Sodom

In the old days some called it just "the village" and others liked to stir things up by calling it Sodom.

"That place is Sodom," old Dr. John Wadsworth once warned a group of back-country farm lads on their way to get jobs with the Duxbury fishing fleet.

"Keep away," said he. "It's Sodom, and it's going to be sunk, it is."

And he made a rhyme for them, which the townsfolk came to know:

The swamplineers avoid all fears,
A fishing they will go.
If they 'scape hell, it will be well
But that they willn't, I know.

That old-time Sodom is the beautiful Duxbury village through which Washington St. now winds on the town's east shore. Little lanes run down from Washington St. to the water; and along the street are homes that once were those of shipbuilders, shipmasters, merchants and artisans, in times of Duxbury's maritime eminence.

That would mean 100 years ago, and 150, and even more.

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I had walked into Washington St. from Harrison, which is to say that I had come in towards its northern end. That was not Sodom. Sodom, it seems, lay a bit to south'ard of that — down beyond where the 2 churches are today, where the village is more thickly settled and its houses are perhaps smaller and quainter, yet no less beautiful than grander places up the way.

From Harrison St. I had caught a glimpse of the bay and of a dock. So I had gone on straight across Washington St. and down a lane that led to a yacht club, 3 or 4 fragile yacht piers, and to a yard in which boats were stowed.

The shore was in a deathlike Winter sleep — clubhouse windows shuttered against the gales, the piers terribly empty, as were the shoreside benches near them. A man came out from among the boats, and went into a building. A car drove in, and drove out again.

From the end of one of the slender docks I watched 4 waterbirds diving for their dinners.

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Shipbuilding had begun about 1720 at the Nook cove, 2 miles away in the south part of town, and soon other vessels were on the ways at nearby Harden Hill.

It was down there in a Harden Hill yard that 21-year-old Ezra Weston, having learned the shipwright's trade, began his own ship-building venture in 1764. He built

Duxbury Clipper, Wednesday, June 26, 1996

so many vessels in Revolutionary days that the place came to be called the "Navy Yard"; and then Weston went on to become one of the greatest shipowners in the country, and the famed "King Caesar" of the Powder Point story.

With peace came a surging development of American maritime activity, so that by 1790 Alden Bradford could report that a 3rd of the men of "Duxborough" were engaged in "navigation." Twenty vessels of 60 to 90 tons were owned here, employed mainly in the fisheries.

And in the golden 1800's Duxbury once had 14 shipyards at her shore. She built 71 vessels in 1837. More than 100 Duxbury men were seacaptains; Duxbury built vessels were all over the world...and many Duxbury families had become rich.

"The people of Duxbury were very poor," wrote merchant Seth Sprague in his later years — he having done all right himself. He thought it should be remembered, to their credit, that Weston, and Nathaniel and Sam Delano, had started as "4 ships carpenters, all poor and without literary attainments.

"The 2 Winsors went immediately into Bank Fishing," he said, and Weston and others followed.

(From the end of the pier I looked over to the yacht club and a little bight beyond it in the lee of Long Point. Two Winsor Wharves were somewhere in there a century and more ago; and alongshore to south were Sprague's wharf, and Sampson's and another Winsor wharf I think.)

The fishing business and the ships carpenter business increased," wrote Seth Sprague, "and a little village sprang up like a mushroom and it became necessary that a publick highway should be laid out to accommodate this new village..."

The new village was Sodom, and the proposed "publick highway" is now Washington St. — which up to 1800 must have been only a series of cart paths.

New hopes appeared along this shore road, fine new homes, many of them. Business flourished, and then rapidly declined when the demand was for larger vessels than Duxbury Bay's shallow water could accommodate.

By the 1880's Duxbury was famous chiefly as a summer resort. Old houses came into demand, and new ones were built.

In 1890 a newspaper writer became ecstatic over the summer place of famous actress Fanny Davenport. "Its bathrooms are most sumptuous throughout the upper house, having tiled floors, bamboo screens, pictures, rugs, etc." Its present owner, Mrs. George Metcalf, describes the architectural style as "Gen Grantish." Her Westwinds Bookshop is in what was Fanny's barn.

Fanny's sister May and her husband, the distinguished actor-manager William Seymour, were smarter. They got a really old neighboring house in '91 (in which I visited them 30 years later) — now the home of Prof. and Mrs. Richard (Fanny Seymour) Field.

But they are down Sodom way.